

Fighting Iran: Intelligence Support During Operation *Earnest Will*, 1987–88

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Differing assessments of the risks, Iranian decisionmaking, and command and control (C2) fueled persistent controversy within the IC, frustrated some consumers, and became a matter of politicized, acrimonious congressional hearings even before the operation started.

Dozens of recently declassified documents show the crucial role the Intelligence Community (IC) played in supporting US efforts to protect reflagged Kuwaiti tankers against Iranian attack during the height of the so-called “Tanker War” during 1987 and 1988. *Earnest Will*, the US Navy’s operation to escort Kuwaiti tankers granted US flag status, was controversial because of what critics saw as abandonment of US neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), an open-ended commitment, and increasing the risk of escalating conflict with Tehran.¹

Differing assessments of the risks, Iranian decisionmaking, and command and control (C2) fueled persistent controversy within the IC, frustrated some consumers, and became a matter of politicized, acrimonious congressional hearings even before the operation started. Nevertheless, CIA did a creditable job in providing structured, reasoned assessments of potential Iranian responses. The IC provided tactical warning of some Iranian attacks, and IC scientific and technical intelligence analysis assessed the danger posed by Iranian weapons, established Tehran’s culpability in their use despite Iranian denials, and offered persuasive evidence when Iran took the United States to court before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for attacking its oil

platforms in the so-called “Platforms Case.”

This article relies primarily on declassified reports—often heavily redacted—on *Earnest Will* released since the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988. Many of the reports are on CIA’s FOIA Electronic Reading Room on cia.gov or are posted in CIA’s CREST database, which is accessible at the National Archives in College Park, MD. As we approach *Earnest Will*’s 30th anniversary next year, the number of available documents on the escort effort has increased, with a significant trove of National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), CIA analytic assessments and talking points, and internal memos becoming available since 2010. A smaller number of reports from military commands and other IC agencies appear in other databases. These reports build on linear inches of documents submitted by the US government to the ICJ (and to Iran) during the Platforms Case.^a

a. Several books treat *Earnest Will* and use sources—particularly interviews—not used in this article. See David Crist, *The Twilight War* (2012) and Harold L. Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone* (2007) for two of the best. Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. William C. Crowe and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger devote lengthy sections in their memoirs to the operation. See Crowe, *The Line of Fire*, 186–211 and Weinberger, *Fighting For Peace*, 387–428.

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Major Incidents During Operation *Earnest Will*



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Operation Earnest Will Chronology of Major Events

1987

- Spring: US considers Kuwaiti request for aid.
- July: *Earnest Will* begins
- 24 Jul: *Bridgeton* strikes a mine
- 10 Aug: Tanker damaged and supply ship sunk in Iranian minefield in Gulf of Oman
- 21–22 Sep: US Navy seizes and sinks Iranian naval mine laying vessel
- 8 Oct: US Army helicopters sink a Boghammer and two whalers in northern Gulf after they fired at US helicopters
- 16 Oct: Iranian Silkworm ASCM hits reflagged tanker *Sea Isle City* in Kuwaiti waters.
- 19 Oct: US Navy destroyed Rashadat oil platform in retaliation for *Sea Isle City* attack

1988

- 14 Apr: USS *Samuel B. Roberts* strikes mine northeast of Qatar
- 18 Apr: US Navy destroyed Sassan and Sirri oil platforms and sank or disabled three Iranian naval combatants and three small boats
- 3 Jul: USS *Vincennes* mistakenly shoots down Iranian Airbus over the Strait of Hormuz

The Geopolitical Context of Earnest Will

Earnest Will was Washington's response to Kuwait's request for maritime protection during the Iran-Iraq War, a conflict that by 1987 was stalemated in its seventh year. Iraq had expanded the war to the Gulf in 1984 by attacking Iranian shipping in attempts to force Iran to accept a ceasefire and hinder its ability to export oil, its primary source of foreign exchange. Iran, unwilling to accept a ceasefire, reciprocated, but it generally responded to Iraqi ship attacks on a tit-for-tat basis while preferring to confine the war to land, where it had significant advantages.²

The approaches of the two countries to conducting ship attacks, however, differed considerably. The Iraqi Air Force typically attacked merchant ships in the Iranian-declared exclusion zone by launching Exocet antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) at suspected, but not positively identified, targets in or near the zone. This imprecise targeting technique contributed to Iraq's inadvertent attack on the USS *Stark* in May 1987.³

In contrast, Iran usually was more selective in picking its victims as it tried to dissuade Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from supporting Iraq and to alter oil prices. Tehran in particular attacked ships associated in trade with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait because the two countries provided significant financial and logistical support to Iraq. Iran would typically identify targets using maritime patrol aircraft or its own warships. CIA analysts judged that Iranian intelligence could identify which ships transiting the Gulf were US-associated and that Tehran's na-

val force could, in turn, identify these ships for attack.⁴

Both sides occasionally laid mines (of different types) before *Earnest Will* started, and Tehran would use Baghdad's earlier minelaying as a pretext for its own minelaying campaign. Iran and Iraq also used variants of the HY-2 ASCM, the so-called Silkworm, with Iraqi B-6D bombers using one version while Iranian shore batteries used another—a similarity that Iran again would try to use to blame Baghdad for missiles fired by Iranian forces.

These dynamics changed, however, when the United States started *Earnest Will* in July 1987. Kuwait in December 1986 had asked Moscow to protect its tankers, and the US government seriously began considering a similar request by the spring of 1987. Iran perceived Kuwait to be a near co-belligerent to Iraq, however, given the economic aid it was providing and Kuwaiti willingness to allow its ports to be used as primary points for arms transshipments to Iraq.⁵

Tehran saw US assistance to Kuwait as a step toward widening the war, tilting the balance toward Iraq, and sharply increasing US naval presence in the Gulf—all developments it was determined to avoid. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration was willing to protect Kuwaiti tankers for a variety of reasons, including a general tilt in favor of Iraq in its war with Iran, a preference to keep Soviet forces out of the region—the Cold War was still well under way—a principled commitment to freedom of navigation, and a desire to buttress its credentials with allies in the GCC after the Iran-Contra affair in 1986

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revealed that Washington had provided weapons to Iran.⁶

After bitter congressional debate, *Earnest Will* started with a bang in July 1987 when *Bridgeton*, a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker, struck a mine near Farsi Island in the northern Persian Gulf while on the first *Earnest Will* convoy. Rather than a single dramatic event, however, the escort regime evolved into a series of incidents, some occurring without warning, and intermittent US responses. The graphic on the left, based on DIA's reconstruction, highlights the operation's tumultuous first year.⁷

Assessing Iranian Decisionmaking, Intent, and C2 Problematic, Frustrating for Consumers

The IC was divided throughout the first year of the operation over how far Iran would go to hinder *Earnest Will* and debated about subordinate problems such as the cohesion in Iranian decisionmaking and the reliability of Iran's C2. Even when the IC agreed on one judgment, other disagreements routinely surfaced in finished production and internal CIA memoranda.

Subsequent memoirs suggest that some policymakers were frustrated by the reporting and accused the IC of automatically defaulting to alarmist reporting when they did agree.⁸ Adm. William Crowe, then-chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later unfairly accused the IC of not really knowing what Tehran was going to do and instead simply offering worst-case scenarios in assessing Iran's willingness to fight at sea. He said he took the "appraisals with a large grain of salt" and offered a bleak characterization of the IC's analysis:

*The Iranians would be so upset by our reflagging that they would do anything they could to hurt Americans, not only in the Gulf but around the world. We would light an inferno we could not control. The prospects of success were nil; the whole Gulf would be aflame. That, in general terms, was the intelligence estimate.*⁹

The CIA probably could not have done much better in assessing Iranian intent, given the limited available evidence and the probability that analysts were trying to anticipate decisions the Iranians themselves had yet to make. An internal CIA memo captured the problem as one of insufficient evidence: "No one has all the information and, based on the limited facts, a disagreement existed on the degree of threat."¹⁰ Rear Adm. Harold Bernsen, then-commander, Middle East Force, later lamented in his oral history that it was "very difficult to ferret out specific details concerning leadership decisionmaking ... I never saw any report, and certainly no report to be authoritative. So what you really did was make your assumptions based on what you knew about them, their track record."¹¹

The debate spread out in various forms once *Earnest Will* started, but the IC arguments in May and June 1987 reflect dynamics recurring over



A convoy of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, under US Navy escort, moves through the Persian Gulf on 22 August 1987. The nearest ship is the SS *Bridgeton*, which had struck a mine the month before. (US Navy photo through Defenseimagery.mil)

the next year. The written record shows that the IC at least helped bound the risks, although its testimony was not always palatable to partisans in the congressional debates over reflagging. CIA staked out the worst-case assessment in the spring of 1987 when a series of intelligence products and internal memos concluded that Iran would “likely continue to probe to attack an escorted ship”—a scenario DIA and INR considered to be low probability. The CIA reasoned that even if Iran suffered US retaliation against its naval forces, a successful strike would “increase significantly the Gulf states’ concern and intensify the debate in the United States on the wisdom of US involvement. Tehran is likely to expect that such a US debate would lead over time to a weakening of US resolve.”¹²

Summarizing the dispute in June 1987, the assistant national intelligence officer (NIO) for the Near East and South Asia reported that there was universal agreement that reflagging per se would not deter an attack on an unescorted ship and that there was general agreement that Iran would not immediately seek to confront a US combatant. Most agencies judged that Iran would seek ways to demonstrate it was not intimidated by the presence of the US flag or even a warship. If Iran could create a tactical situation in which it could successfully attack or damage a reflagged ship it would do so.¹³

The IC also raised the specter that Iran might stage an attack using its newly-acquired Silkworm ASCMs, characterized by Secretary of Defense Weinberger as a “very destabilizing weapon,” although analysts disagreed over whether a Silkworm

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attack was imminent.¹⁴ An NIE published in June 1987 concluded that most in the IC believed that Iran “is less likely to use Silkworm missiles against US or Soviet naval vessels, at least until Tehran has exhausted other measures to obtain its objectives.” The estimate continued, however,

*Others, while they agree that Silkworm attacks on US or Soviet warships are less likely than on commercial shipping, do not believe the Iranians perceive the Silkworm as a weapon of last resort.*¹⁵

The CIA concluded that Iran would continue its anti-Kuwait “crusade” to force Kuwait to cease or reduce its support to Iraq, intimidate other Gulf states by demonstrating that increased superpower involvement in the region risked dragging the Arabs into expanded conflict, and protect Iran’s goal of becoming the dominant power in the region. The agency noted that the Iranian clerics’ history of refusing to back down in the face of threats, their recent hostile rhetoric, and an attack on a Soviet ship suggested that Tehran would pursue a course of confrontation.¹⁶

Analysts Disagree over Iranian Decisionmaking

Subordinate debates about Tehran’s decisionmaking and the reliability of its C2 complicated assessments over how Iran might confront *Earnest Will* convoys. The NIO for Warning in October 1987 highlighted differing IC interpretations of Iranian decisionmaking. One group of analysts contended that there was debate in Tehran over strategy, with

a hardline group wanting confrontation while more pragmatic elements supported a more measured course. Other analysts believed the debate was only over tactics and that the whole government of Iran would take escalatory steps in the Gulf if it believed it could not accomplish its objectives in other ways.¹⁷

In any event, an internal CIA post-mortem on Iranian decisionmaking on the war in August 1988 concluded that Iranian elites were divided and the intelligence reporting simply reflected these debates within Tehran. The report opined that CIA might have been sending mixed messages in its reporting, with analysis citing increasing incentives for Iran to change while at the same time calling attention to steadfast reluctance to do so, probably “an accurate reflection of the corporate schizophrenia among Iranian leaders.”¹⁸

Debates over the Integrity of Iranian C2

Analysts debated whether Iranian naval forces would consistently and totally adhere to Tehran’s orders. The CIA had assessed in February 1987 that there was a risk of an unprovoked attack on US forces that would not be sanctioned by the Iranian leadership because of the relative independence of the radical fundamentalist groups that the revolution had spawned.¹⁹ An NIE published in June 1987, however, concluded that there was little evidence that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was acting as a “rogue elephant” in the Gulf and noted that the organization had been put under tighter control. Other analysts, however, did

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin released a press statement claiming the committee had learned of vast differences within the Reagan administration on the Persian Gulf threat.

not entirely discount the possibility that a local Guard commander might act independently to attack a US-flag ship.²⁰

Discerning Iran's Breaking Point

US policymakers must have been frustrated when they read CIA analysis implying that Iran was implacable and had the resolve to withstand any pain the United States might attempt to impose. The CIA in June 1987 warned that Iran was prepared for a direct conventional military confrontation with the United States.

Concern over US retaliation will not deter them (Iran) if they conclude direct confrontation is necessary to show that Iran will not be intimidated by the superpowers. They probably calculate that a nation that has suffered

*massive material damage and over 700,000 casualties to win the war with Iraq will be able to absorb even the strongest punishment the US is likely to inflict.*²¹

Putting it another way, the tone of the August 1988 postmortem raised a similar question about whether the IC might be overstating Iran's resolve. The report concluded that CIA analysis sometimes seemed to imply "an almost limitless ability of the Iranians to endure suffering, and to assume that adversity builds anger and resistance rather than resignation."²²

Whether CIA overstated Iran's determination in June 1987, Iran did demonstrate a willingness to continue challenging *Earnest Will* throughout the year. The events preceding the

August 1988 ceasefire by just a few weeks—dramatic Iraqi battlefield successes, successful US contingency operations against Iran during *Praying Mantis*—retaliatory US attacks on Iranian warships and an oil platform—and the USS *Vincennes* airbus shootdown—probably were so shocking in Iran that they changed its decisionmaking calculus in ways that were not possible in June 1987.

A byproduct of the debates appeared when they broke out on the congressional stage, and House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin released a press statement claiming the committee had learned of vast differences within the Reagan administration on the Persian Gulf threat.²³ DoD on 15 June 1987 provided a report to Congress on the proposed escort regime, and Aspin concluded that CIA had a much gloomier assessment than DIA and that CIA had not been given an adequate opportunity to comment on the report.²⁴

After hearing the initial CIA testimony on 17 June, the committee asked the IC to return so it could probe the difference, an invitation that CIA staffers noted "falls into the category of a current political issue" that involved CIA in "a face-to-face dispute with a policy agency."²⁵

After the follow-up testimony on 19 June, CIA concluded that in this case the differences were based more on semantics than on policy disagreements, with CIA analysis extending out to a year compared to the two-month timeframe of the DoD white paper. Unlike the white paper, the CIA analysis also had highlighted the danger to US and Western interests posed by Iranian terrorists responding



An Iranian corvette burns after a US air strike conducted during Operation *Praying Mantis* in the summer of 1988. (Photo courtesy of US Naval Institute Press.)

to *Earnest Will*.²⁶ Admiral Crowe, however, treated the assessments as imbued with alarmist reporting, noting, “our opponents in Congress loved it.”²⁷

IC Provided Tactical Warning (Sometimes)

An array of heavily redacted documents shows that the IC repeatedly provided tactical warnings throughout *Earnest Will* although surprises did occur. The IC gained insights into Iranian contingency plans and used them to inform warning indicators. In fact, the IC was able to warn of Iranian preparations to lay mines on the route of the *Bridgeton* convoy, to use the naval unit *Iran Ajr* to mine the central Persian Gulf, and, apparently, to attack Kuwait and Saudi oil facilities. According to Secretary Weinberger, US intelligence efforts also enabled Washington to determine “with fair confidence” which Iranian ships were doing the mining.²⁸

Evidence on Iranian War Plans a Basis for Warning

The body of declassified documents shows the IC had reports on several Iranian contingency plans, although their detail, provenance, and reporting veracity are not apparent in the record. The NIO for Warning in April 1988 wrote that Iran had numerous contingency plans for operations in the Gulf, including amphibious assaults against GCC countries and direct attacks against US Navy ships.²⁹ Such plans, however, were merely options that would not dictate Ayatollah Khomeini’s ultimate decision and certainly could not be the sole basis of a US indications and warning effort. The IC cited Iranian

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contingency plans to achieve the following:

- ***Closing the Strait:*** The IC in June 1987 reported that Iran had contingency plans to close the Strait of Hormuz to oil using most or all of its navy and a sizable portion of the air force. The effort was likely to include systematic attacks on critical oil installations throughout the Gulf and the use of Silkworm missiles. Nevertheless, the IC optimistically assessed that Tehran would be able to close the Strait of Hormuz for no more than a week or two.³⁰
- ***Offensive mining:*** The CIA reported in July 1987 that Iran had made contingency plans and trained personnel for mining operations since early in the Iran-Iraq War.³¹ Iran also developed plans to use IRGC “suicide commandos” to place limpet mines—small explosive charges—on the hulls of US warships.³²
- ***Attacks against GCC oil facilities:*** Iran by October 1987 had developed a plan to attack Saudi and Kuwaiti facilities in the northern Gulf.³³
- ***Seize Bubiyan Island:*** The NIO for Warning in July 1987 referred to Iranian contingency plans to occupy Kuwait’s Bubiyan Island.³⁴
- ***Attack on a US warship:*** The IRGC by November 1987 had developed a plan to attack a US ship with 100 small boats.³⁵
- ***Terrorism:*** A senior CIA official in April 1988 warned that Iran

had contingency plans for actions against US individuals and facilities in Europe and the Persian Gulf.³⁶

The IC leaned forward to improve the amount and speed of tactical warning to the operating forces, judging from declassified accounts. National Security Council (NSC) meetings revealed that by May 1987 the United States was approaching Saudi Arabia to extend AWACS coverage in the Gulf and in June 1987 that Washington was preparing to orchestrate satellite coverage, AWACS flights, and P-3 maritime patrol aircraft on behalf of *Earnest Will*.³⁷ The National Photographic Intelligence Center (NPIC), forerunner of today’s National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, dove into the Silkworm threat, a major concern for policymakers as well as for *Earnest Will* convoys having to brave the Strait of Hormuz.



The *Iran Ajr*. (Photo courtesy of USNI)

Enjoying mixed success, the warning effort unfortunately suggests that while national-intelligence support was a wonderful force enabler, the prudent commander still must train for situations that afford absolutely no warning.

This area, along with the occupied Al Faw Peninsula in the northern Gulf, eventually was home to many of the Silkworm sites. NPIC in June 1987 was charged with providing the Navy immediate, direct, daily tactical support that generally took the form of two messages released each night based on exploitation of 80 Iranian targets. Although initially the reports went to Reef Point, a specially equipped P-3 aircraft that was to precede the convoys, they ultimately received wider dissemination.³⁸

- **Bridgeton mining:** A few hours before *Bridgeton* struck a mine on the morning of 24 July, the Middle East Force commander (COMIDEASTFOR) received an intelligence tipoff regarding Iranian activity on Farsi Island, according to RAdm. Harold Bernsen's account.³⁹ Iran had staged previous ship attacks from Farsi, an island located within a few miles of the tanker's intended route. Bernsen slowed the convoy so that it would pass Farsi during daylight, but *Bridgeton* encountered a floating mine rather than the anticipated small-boat attack. IRGC divers using speedboats had laid the mines under cover of darkness, according to subsequently declassified HUMINT reports that the United States submitted to the ICJ.⁴⁰
- **Iran Ajr minelaying attempt:** NPIC in September 1987 provided the initial tipoff that Iran might be preparing to lay mines with the result that a SIGINT watch was placed on *Iran Ajr*, according to NPIC's declassified account.⁴¹

The United States had been tracking the ship for two or three days when COMIDEASTFOR units noted that the ship was well beyond her normal patrol area.⁴² When Army helicopter pilots flying from USS *Jarrett* reported that *Iran Ajr* was dropping mine-like objects, the admiral quickly gave the order to take the Iranians under fire.⁴³ Ultimately, US forces discovered that the ship had been transporting Iranian-made Sadaf 02 moored contact mines.

The IC's exploitation of documents aboard the ship also revealed hostile intent despite Iranian public claims that *Iran Ajr* merely had been transporting mines to a base in the northern Gulf. Message traffic carried aboard the ship revealed that it was on an unusual mission from the moment it had departed Bandar Abbas on 20 September. In its frequent flash-precedence situation reports to the First Naval District Command Post Bandar Abbas, *Iran Ajr* called itself a "special mission unit" (at least until the Command Post directed it not to use the term, presumably for reasons of operational security). As it approached the likely minelaying area on the 21st, it began referring to "Bahador," the likely designation for both the area and minelaying operation. For example, *Iran Ajr* reported that "if approved, Bahador to be executed at 2300."⁴⁴

- **Aborted attack on Saudi and Kuwaiti oil platforms:** NPIC reported that during the summer and fall of 1987, IRGC small boats had massed in the northern Persian

Gulf.⁴⁵ Following an exercise held that summer, many of these boats remained at bases in Bushehr and Kharg Island. Most were removed from the water and were inactive until late September.⁴⁶ CIA reported on 2 October 1987, however, that 50 boats had left Bushehr Halileh and at least 10 had arrived at Kharg, a logical staging base for attacks on offshore oil facilities in the northern Gulf.⁴⁷ AWACS detected associated blips moving across the Gulf and COMIDEASTFOR quickly repositioned ships in response, but ultimately the IRGC aborted the attack due to rough seas, according to author David Crist's account of the incident.⁴⁸

Enjoying mixed success, the warning effort unfortunately suggests that while national-intelligence support was a wonderful force enabler, the prudent commander still must train for situations that afford absolutely no warning. Tactical warning was inconsistent during the escort regime. For example, SEALs aboard the surveillance barge *Hercules* reported that they were nearly attacked by a force of 40 small boats on 8 Oct 1987 without any warning other than their own radar. The boats turned away as COMIDEASTFOR moved ships and aircraft into the area, and another Iranian attack was aborted, according to Crist's account. "No one realized how close a call we had that night," according to the SEAL commander and a senior COMIDEASTFOR staff officer.⁴⁹

USS *Samuel B. Roberts* struck a mine on 14 April 1988 and nearly sank, evidently without receiving any warning that it might be steam-

ing into a minefield. This occurred following a half-year hiatus since the last Iranian-US dustup, and the declassified documents do not offer a compelling reason why the Iranians laid the mines.

Robust Scientific and Technical Intelligence Effort Defined Threat, Established Iranian Culpability

The IC provided technical insights into Iranian missiles and sea mines that defined the threat, informed countermeasure development, and countered Tehran's claim that Iraq was using these weapons against the West. The IC provided detailed reports to policymakers and the fleet highlighting the technical capabilities of the weapons and warning of changes in the inventory. IC experts shared additional insights after flying to the Gulf to examine Iranian mines and missile fragments.

Iran's newly-acquired Silkworm ASCM received the most attention of any Iranian weapon discussed in policy circles because it was a game changer. The system was on the agendas of repeated NSC meetings and by May 1987 the JCS was reviewing the status of plans to destroy Silkworm launch sites using TLAM-Cs.⁵⁰ Unlike other Iranian ASCMs, Silkworm warranted the attention because its 500 kg warhead was seven times larger than that of any other Iranian ASCM and the missile could sink a variety of merchant ships.⁵¹

CIA assessed that there would be little or no tactical warning that a Silkworm—a "reliable, effective anti-ship weapon"—was being prepared for launch.⁵² The agency judged that

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a single Silkworm had as much as a 70-percent chance of hitting an unprotected ship of medium-to-large size. Ships protected by active or electronic defense systems might be able to defend against a single HY-2 but could have trouble defending against two or more missiles approaching simultaneously.⁵³ China had sold Iran 12 Silkworm batteries, each with four launchers and some 24 missiles⁵⁴ so Iran could attempt to saturate a target by firing salvos of missiles, a tactic made more effective by limited reaction times in close quarters such as the Strait of Hormuz and the extreme northern Persian Gulf.

IC analysts proved that Iran had launched Silkworms at Kuwait. They demonstrated that missile fragments (including portions of the seeker and fuselage) obtained from missile wreckage after two launches differed from Iraq's air-launched variant. The mounting lugs were designed for a ground launcher and the seeker was unique to the ground-launched variants found only in Iran's arsenal.⁵⁵

The IC highlighted the mining threat—also a topic at NSC meetings even before *Earnest Will* started.⁵⁶ The IC assessed the threat posed by Iran's Sadaf 02 mines, discussed the implications of the delivery of more sophisticated sea mines from Libya,⁵⁷ and later established that Iran had laid the mines the US ships and foreign freighters had struck. Although Iran had copied the Russian-designed M-08 contact mine, Office of Naval Intelligence experts showed that Iran in fact was manufacturing a unique mine, rather than an exact copy of the

M-08, given considerable differences in Iranian production process used to make their version of the original M-08. Exhaustive ONI analysis showed that the Sadaf 02 (a spherical mine containing 114 kg of explosives) differed appreciably from the M-08. Moreover, the Iranians had stenciled a unique serial number series (a combination of mine designation, production year, production lot, and mine number) on each Sadaf 02 found on or near *Iran Ajr* and Sadaf 02s elsewhere in the Gulf. Sadaf 02s had appeared in minefields off Kuwait (May 1987), near Khor Fakkan in the Gulf of Oman (August 1987), and near the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (April 1988). US lawyers before the ICJ called the mine "Iran's calling card."

Lessons Learned

Earnest Will demonstrated the challenges in providing intelligence support to forces operating in close to a determined, resourceful, and technically proficient adversary. A few lessons learned include the following.

- ***Tactical warning is not guaranteed.*** No matter how much money is spent by the IC, a ship or afloat staff still can find itself in the position of dealing with potential bolts from the blue. The more money spent on tactically responsive surveillance systems the better. Should these fail, however, it is the ship's combat and damage-control proficiency that will matter most.

- **National imagery paid in spades.** NPIC's timely warnings repeatedly helped inform operational responses, and the flash-precedence daily imagery readouts doubtless provided a degree of confidence to *Earnest Will* convoy commanders. Nevertheless there were surprises, particularly for activity that may not have been susceptible to national imagery coverage.
- **Need for additional maritime surveillance.** In commenting on the *Bridgeton*'s mine strike during the first *Earnest Will* convoy, Admiral Crowe noted that, "we had thought our field intelligence on Iranian activity would be more comprehensive, and our patrolling in advance of the convoy hadn't been all it should have been."⁵⁸ The US enhanced its surveillance of the Gulf in innovative ways, but there were almost certainly gaps in theater coverage that Iran could

then exploit. *Earnest Will* might have had fewer incidents had it had more extensive, persistent imagery coverage.

- **Assessing adversary decision-making and strategic intent probably was the most difficult analytic challenge.** The complicated, dynamic, and closed nature of Tehran's decisionmaking complicated the IC's risk-assessment process, created fissures in the IC, and probably frustrated some policymakers who perceived they were merely getting worst-case analysis rather than the benefit of the more rigorous constructs used by CIA. Despite frustrating the defense secretary and CJCS, however, CIA production was carefully structured and effectively spoke truth to the policymaker.
- **Confidence levels and sourcing could have been better addressed.**

Although rigorously reasoned, CIA's production might have been better received had it consistently addressed its confidence levels in key judgments, particularly on the most controversial topics.

In summary, the newly-released material provides a number of new insights, particularly on the challenges of conducting intelligence analysis on a controversial topic. This article probably understates the IC's contribution to the operating forces, however. Much of the declassified source material is redacted or partially sanitized, so the available evidence probably does not fairly or fully portray the full dynamics of some issues. Other evidence is almost certainly still classified. The deluge of material release since 2010, however, is an excellent start in helping us authoritatively consider, and teach, the nature of intelligence support during complex, high-risk operations.



Endnotes

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